

Secret evaluation team will assess FirstNet RFP bids

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All [FirstNet](#) board members last week unanimously voted to approve the final request for proposal (RFP) for the multibillion-dollar nationwide public-safety broadband network, but the full board will not select the winning bid. Instead, FirstNet officials say that a team that could have representation from the board and other federal entities will spearhead an evaluation process that will result in a selection recommendation that will be executed formally by the contracting officer being used by FirstNet.

FirstNet CEO Mike Poth said that FirstNet board members understand and approved the evaluation process, which will be revealed in greater detail when the RFP is released early next month.

“There’s a specific, structured process that the board has bought into,” Poth said during a conference call with members of the press after last Wednesday’s full board meeting. “They’re clear on their roles and responsibilities in that process. They feel very comfortable.

“We can’t get into details specific to that, but the board and their expertise is certainly being brought to bear. It certainly has been brought to bear up to this point, and we—consistent with the structured evaluation process—are going to be able to capitalize on that, as needed.”

Members of the evaluation team will not be revealed publically, in accordance with federal acquisitions regulations (FAR) 3.104—the section that outlines “Procurement Integrity”—according to FirstNet spokesman Ryan Oremland.

“We’ve set up an evaluation team, which may consist of members of FirstNet staff, the FirstNet Board, senior managers and advisors, as well as our partners the U.S. Department of the Interior [DOI], the [National Telecommunications and Information Administration](#) [NTIA] and the U.S. Department of Commerce [DoC],” Oremland said in a prepared statement. “All members of the evaluation team will be subject to ethics reviews to ensure a conflict-free evaluation.”

The evaluation team will assess all proposals and make a selection recommendation to the contracting officer (CO) and source-selection authority (SSA)—in this case, Terrie Callahan, who is working for FirstNet as part of an interagency agreement with the U.S. Department of the Interior—who ensures that all rules and regulations are followed properly. Theoretically, the contracting officer could select a vendor team other than the one recommended by the evaluation team, but that “rarely, if ever, happens,” according to a Beltway source familiar with the process.

With \$6.5 billion in federal funding—not to mention tens of billions more in potential user fees and spectrum-access rights—associated with the FirstNet project that promises to be a critical part of future first-responder communications, there has been significant interest in the selection process.

Aside from general curiosity, most questions surrounding the FirstNet selection process have focused on two areas: (1) having qualified people evaluate and select the proposal that will best serve public safety for the long term; and (2) ensuring that the process is done in accordance with federal procurement rules, so the FirstNet system deployment is not delayed or derailed by legal protests surrounding the bid process.

In terms of the first matter, [FirstNet](#) Chairwoman Sue Swenson in June expressed concern that conflict-of-interest rules would prevent the FirstNet board members with the greatest knowledge about building broadband networks and spotting key contract language in industry proposals from participating in the evaluation process. If the issue was not addressed properly, the result could be that [FirstNet could get “snookered” in a deal with a partner](#), Swenson said.

After the RFP is released, vendors will have three weeks to submit questions about the 508-page document, which FirstNet officials plan to answer within 30 days. However, all FirstNet officials have been outspoken in their desire to conduct the upcoming procurement in a manner that meets all federal rules and regulations—essentially, they will not discuss matters associated with the procurement process—so the massive network project is not jeopardized.

FirstNet hopes the RFP will address any concerns, Poth said.

“We’ve gone to painstaking measures to make sure that we have what we believe is a clear, concise document that captures the spirit and intent of building the national network,” Poth said. “If we have failed in doing that and confuse industry, ... that will probably manifest itself during the question period in the first 30 days [after the RFP is released].”

“But we believe that we have structured a process that is fair, competitive and as open and transparent as possible. We’ve gone to painstaking measures over the last two years to get a lot of feedback from all of the different constituents to make sure that we’ve captured what’s important to public safety, what’s important to industry and what’s important to FirstNet. Hopefully, that resonates when they see the RFP.”

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